# Political Geography: Where's Citizenship?

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**Abstract:** Citizenship is common subject in political geography, but a quick review of the literature suggests considerable differences in the way it is conceptualised and its importance understood. This report reviews debates on the salience of citizenship in the context of broad social, political, and economic changes. It reviews the relationships between institutions, laws, belonging, practices, and space in the construction and reconstruction of citizenship. Rather than attempting to assign a relative importance to citizenship as status as compared to citizenship as membership, it focuses on the continual re-articulation of the relationships and sites through which citizenship is constructed.

**Keywords:** Citizenship, nation-state, membership, citizen-subject

## I Introduction

Contemporary debates over citizenship seem a lot like a *Where's Waldo?* book. The picture books and allied products feature a search for Waldo, a cartoon character, in the midst of complex scenes, crowded with people, animals, buildings. Traces of Waldo and of Waldo-like figures are sprinkled throughout each page, interacting with the nearby environment and other people, and engaged in many different activities. Yet as Waldo is embedded in specific scenes, he nevertheless goes on fantastic voyages that seem to transcend space and time. He has different names and different features in different parts of the world. He is sometimes confused with his opposite, Odlaw, which is Waldo

spelled backwards. And the incessant search for him makes him seem simultaneously illusive and ubiquitous.

Working through debates over citizenship is like trying to pin down Waldo in his books. Emerging from the literature are several impressions: citizenship is multifaceted; it is embedded in the relationships that both construct places and link particular places to broader networks; it takes on different aspects and significance for people in different contexts; and it seems to be defined as much by what it is *not* as by what it is. Just when you think you have found it, a new discussion, a new formulation, a reinterpretation of past events makes you realise how elusive the figure of the citizen is and where it is located. I ndeed, citizenship is such a slippery concept and category that it is tempting to try to avoid it. Yet citizenship – as a legal category, as a claim, as an identity, as a tool in nation building, and as an ideal – endures as a subject of debate, research, and politics. Even if, as scholars, we wish a more precise concept, continued struggles for citizenship mean that citizenship continues to attract the attention of geographers.

## II The Relationships of Citizenship

Debates over citizenship can be difficult to trace for several reasons: different definitions of citizenship are deployed; there is disagreement over whether citizenship should be conceptualised in universal terms or as inflected by particularity and context; the debates occur in different venues with corresponding differences in the substance or ideal of citizenship and styles of argumentation. Yet despite these differences, there is recognition that 'actually existing citizenship' cannot be detached from broader currents and processes shaping societies. It is therefore important to consider citizenship as both a status and as a set of relationships through which membership is constructed through physical and metaphorical boundaries and in the sites and practices that give it meaning.

### *Bordering Processes and the Boundaries of Citizenship*

Physical borders are, of course, important to the process of distinguishing citizens or potential citizens. These efforts are promoted as ways to protect citizens within a country from 'illegal' migrants or from those who would do harm, whether by taking jobs from citizens, by imposing burdens on taxpayers, by challenging social norms, or

through physical violence. Yet these border controls are part of a larger dynamic of exclusion and 'othering' that is integral to nation-states and the ways that citizenship is often imagined and reinforced through discourses of fear (Pain, 2009). The process of bordering requires that citizens and their others are put into a relation. Paradoxically, it is often a relation in which the boundaries between the two are blurred and in which the technologies of the border are applied to citizen and non-citizen alike. There are three interrelated elements of the process of bordering citizenship in this metaphorical sense that are particularly important: tolerance, 'responsibilisation', and neo-communitarianism.

On the face of it, tolerance seems an odd technology in constructing the boundaries of membership and citizenship. Yet Brown (2006) argues that tolerance serves to 'other' people who do not conform to the values and social norms of a polity and for whom the rights of citizenship can thereby be denied. Tolerance, she argues, seems like a universal value that should be hard to contest, but that its apparent universalism and neutrality masks the ideological work it does in designating only certain practices and certain ways of being as appropriate to citizens. In political debates, other words substitute for 'tolerance,' such as 'multiculturalism' and even 'recognition'. Wood and Gilbert (2005) argue that easy invocations of multiculturalism serve to deflect deeper, meaningful deliberation about how the nation is constituted and how difference should be incorporated. Similarly, Schapp (2004, pp. 524-5) argues that recognition and tolerance are anti-political in ways that lead to "a reduction and violent appropriation of the other" and to exclusion of those who cannot or will not be appropriated. Tolerance, recognition, and multiculturalism, then, may serve as a poultice that reduces the pain of marginalisation without addressing its underlying causes.

Hand in hand with discourses of tolerance are discourses of neo-communitarianism and responsibility that enforce the boundaries of citizenship in terms of membership. Neo-communitarianism is used by Jessop (2002) in his analysis of the ways neo-liberalism has infiltrated governance. It represents a reassertion of the role of communities in fostering 'active citizenship' and addressing social exclusion through the voluntary sector. In the 1980s and 1990s, the putative return of responsibility for social welfare to civil society and communities represented a redefinition – and frequently, a retrenchment – of the state's role in social welfare provision and in ensuring the social

rights of citizenship. While the effects of these shifts are seen in many arenas, they collectively represent a re-imagining of citizenship, often described as a shift to citizen-consumers (Newman and Clarke, 2009), to active citizens (Fuller, et al., 2008), to respectful citizens (Gaskell, 2008) or to aspirational citizens (Raco, 2009). Through these shifts, new boundaries of citizenship and belonging are enforced through policy, social norms and collective values. The invocation of these norms serves to divert attention from the harsh ways they bound the polity and membership. In this way, they complement the more obvious technologies of boundary enforcement seen at the territorial borders of the nation.

*The Sites of Citizenship*

If the borders of citizenship are everywhere – at the physical boundary of national territories, in communities, in political practices and policies, in social norms, embodied in individuals – then the sites of citizenship must be similarly ubiquitous. There are at least three metaphorical sites, however, that are of particular concern in geographic research: public and private spaces, spaces above the national, and sites beyond the global north. Each of these implies a set of relationships that condition the kind of citizenship experienced, exercised and constructed in any given place.

The relationships that suture public and private are numerous. These debates and their implications for the ways citizenship is understood have been rehearsed elsewhere. At this point, I want to simply assert a view it is useful to think of the ways in which sites can simultaneously be public *and* private, can be more-and-less public as they are more-and-less private. This approach opens us to the ways in which identities and agents known as 'citizens' understand the opportunities, capacities, barriers and relationships that motivate them, that condition their understandings of the world, and that enable actions of different kinds. It draws attention, for instance, to the ways in which agents and actions in what is ostensibly the public sphere infiltrate and partially constitute the private. It draws in a range of sites, from the spaces of formal power, to spaces of interaction and public address, to the sites of ordinary lives. It is in these diverse, imbricated sites, that citizenship is forged, given meaning, contested, and changed. Yet these sites and their role in citizenship formation are often overlooked when we try to classify them as either public or private. Many examples of how they are

overlooked could be provided, so I want to focus on one site of citizenship formation to demonstrate how it is linked with other sites: the school.

Schools feature prominently in the lives of most of us. It is an important site of social reproduction, in that education systems are intended to provide what we need to know to function in the world. Yet the formal curriculum is only part of the story regarding education. In part, this is because what constitutes 'need' is contested, and seems to vary historically and geographically. But it also seems to vary by gender, class, 'race', and religion. These differences are apparent in parts of the curriculum that are intended to be 'neutral' or not specific to particular groups (Pykett, 2009a). If we also consider the ways in which curriculum is received and made sense of by students and their families, we can imagine that 'schooling' is connected to a much wider set of relationships and sites than those contained within the physical structure of the school.

As a site of citizenship formation, the school can be thought of as aggregation of the aspirations, ideals, values, and instrumentalities wielded by the gamut of social and political agents in society, who draw on different sources of power as they attempt to mould citizens capable of functioning in particular ways. Rather than a site in which knowledge is imparted, then, the School is a site in which contests over key concepts such as equality, democracy, history, justice, belonging and citizenship are contested (see Ranciére, 2006). The School, thus, extends beyond the physical structure to encompass cultural and political practices by which citizens-in-the-making are managed, disciplined, and enabled. Agents with different sorts of power are involved in this effort and they operate in both formal and informal spaces of education. It is therefore instructive to broaden the discussion to think about the ways in which power is used in a pedagogical sense in the formation of governable citizens, but also in the ways in which citizens enact, co-construct and contest governing practices (Pykett, 209b). A range of geographers have addressed the different political ambitions and visions of citizenship embedded in educational practice, including impulses toward neo-liberalism (Hankins and Martin, 2006; Mitchell, 2006), ideas of 'civicness' (Pykett, 2009a), internationalism (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003) and reconciliation (Oglesby, 2007). While the state and allied organisations may have the most obvious and pervasive power in this regard, other agents mobilise different values, expectations and histories. Students, for example, are not passive vessels into which knowledge is poured, but rather compare what is

presented with the lives they experience (el-Haj, 2007). Teachers may find themselves and odds with what they are expected to deliver (Hammett, 2008), and parents and community leaders may object to curriculum and protest its content or delivery (Hromadzic, 2008). These examples demonstrate the ways in which specific sites of citizenship formation are connected with and are inseparable from other sites, discourses, and values.

This logic can be extended to citizenships in sites that seem to challenge citizenship-in-the-state, such as post-national, transnational, cosmopolitan, and global citizenships. As many researchers have demonstrated, these citizenships are not alternatives to citizenship-in-the-state, but instead are constructed through and in relation to it. For example, international human rights regimes are sometimes argued to be the basis for an emerging post-national citizenship. Those regimes, however, are supported – and sometimes contested – by national governments, and as Benhabib (2006) has argued, they are engaged in 'democratic iterations' by which both supranational and national regimes change practices. It is therefore productive to explore the ways in which the institutions supporting those new citizenships are constructed and sustained by national-level institutions and how the citizenships blend loyalties and affinities that draw from the national state, from other institutions, and by experiences that are not bound by the national state. Appreciating the range of sites, structures and practices advances our understanding of citizenship in at least two ways.

First, attention to a broader range of settings, agents and institutions helps to unmask the ideological work done by calls for cosmopolitan, post-national, and global citizenship. Mitchell (2007), for instance, has demonstrated that different meanings of cosmopolitanism circulate, and these imply very different kinds of politics. The questions raised through this are 'whose cosmopolitanism?' and 'for what purpose?' The cosmopolitan citizenship promoted in South Africa, for example, serves to advance the idea that post-apartheid South Africa is part of the global community of nations, and that citizenship is based on a commitment to human rights for all. But cosmopolitanism is also promoted so that citizens take their place in a global economy and workforce. Failure to do so can be interpreted as a failure to participate and to meet the responsibilities attendant on citizens (Hammett and Staeheli, forthcoming).

Second, it is important to explore the ways in which institutions and a broad range of agents function in terms of the resources and barriers they construct. Political opportunity structures are an amalgam of many different institutions, only some of which are part of the state apparatus. Importantly, political opportunity structures are networked, in that they intersect and overlap with structures in multiple locations or that have developed with respect to a variety of issues. That they intersect allows a kind of mobility to activism, politics and policy that conditions the experience of citizenship or of citizens. McCann (2008), for instance, demonstrates the ways that policy transfer shapes delivery of health services, but in ways that intersect with local conditions. In the process of negotiating the abstract principles of policies that travel and local needs, citizens are 'made' in different ways, in different places, reflecting a range of ideas about responsibility, rights, and about who is a legitimate member of the public. Attention to these issues also allows us to understand the fragmented nature of citizenship whereby individuals may be differently positioned relative to multiple citizenships. Focussing on Aboriginal citizenship in Canada, Wood (2009) demonstrates the way that multiple to sovereign nations were created through negotiations between Native bands and the Canadian government. Extending from her work, it is clear that everyone is positioned and affected by multiple senses of citizenship – substantive, legal, within different spaces, affected by a range institutions and powerful agents operating above and below the level of the state – that mean citizenship is always a fragmented status.

These issues are perhaps most often considered in research on citizenship beyond the global north. The attention given to these sites may stem from the ways in which citizenship is so obviously contested and used in political struggle. It may be that citizenship has a cultural and social specificity, but a specificity that develops in relation to – and perhaps in conflict with – citizenships from the global north. It may be that the 'instability' of citizenships as they develop in post-colonial contexts provides a view into the ways in which institutions, national stories, and polities are actively constructed. Whatever the reasons, citizenships from beyond the 'cultural hearth' of citizenship have been the focus of recent scholarship; this scholarship provides the basis for rich, nuanced understandings of the way citizenship is formed, contested, and reformed.

Examples of this scholarship highlight the ways in which citizenship is implicated in co-present processes that reinforce states and challenge them. Nyamjoh (2007) for

instance, argues that migration processes in Africa co-exist with processes of state formation, assertions of state sovereignty, and international efforts to fix populations in place. The experience of citizenship varies dramatically for elite migrants as compared to refugees, many of whom live 'illegally' in African cities. While states and international organisations may imagine a territorially bounded nation-state, elites imagine and enact more cosmopolitan spaces. Meanwhile, refugees, labour force migrants and less privileged migrants live in suspended spaces of citizenship in which neither cosmopolitan nor national citizenship seem relevant. This popular, lived citizenship may be a better approximation of political life in the global north than is widely accepted. It seems relevant to the experiences of homeless people and youth, for instance. And it resonates with the discussions of transnational citizenship and local citizenship that are common foci of citizenship studies in the north.

Some authors highlight the ways in which notions of public and private that have underlain many analyses in the global north are disrupted and shown to be untenable. McEwan (2005) argues that gendered experiences of participation and in empowerment schemes in South Africa demonstrates the need to rethink the meaning of citizenship, moving beyond instrumental categories of membership (and the consequent ability to make claims) to more ethical and non-instrumental conceptualisations. Yet efforts at empowerment are not unchallenged, as state institutions may not share the same ethical, non-instrumental vision. Very often, multiple processes operate simultaneously to create a chaotic context for the exercise of citizenship. Richardson, et al (2009) explore this through their research on trafficked women who are returned to their communities in Nepal. For many women, the social stigma attached to having been trafficked means that they may not be able to achieve a sustainable livelihood and that they may be rejected by males in the family (typically a father) who would be required to support claims to citizenship. Lacking access to livelihoods, familial support, and government-provided services, these women seem to experience citizenship through its absence.

In many of these analyses, 'culture' is interpreted as either enabling or constraining citizenship, and concomitantly as justifying inclusion or exclusion. Hammett (2008), for instance, documents the ways in which discourses about a 'culture of entitlement' amongst young South African blacks has fuelled a 'culture of un-entitlement' within other communities, whereby they feel excluded from the benefits of

citizenship. These discourses of culture serve as a code by which to express the alienation that 'formerly privileged groups' feel in post-apartheid South Africa. Similarly, Hunt (2009) describes the ways in which a 'culture of informality' ascribed to street vendors in Bogotá is used by state agencies as a justification for removing them from the public spaces of the city. Once again, the coding of culture is important to the analysis. Informality is aligned with irrationality and ungovernability, characteristics that are at odds with liberal constructions of the democratic citizen. The 'failure' to conform to cultural norms of citizenship is *prima facia* grounds for removing people and their activities from spaces coded as being for 'the public.'

These processes of coding and assignation are not the exclusive domain of the state or elites. A variety of analysts have documented the use of essentialised claims based on culture in social movements that challenge the state or that are part of empowerment struggles. Holston (2008) argues that this strategy is often used to highlight the 'disjunctures' in citizenship discourses, in which nominally democratic citizenship is promoted by legitimating deeply rooted, structural inequality. Insurgency calls attention to citizenship as an exclusionary and even oppressive technology of rule; in so doing, movements often rely on essentialised claims about the culture of marginalised groups in an attempt to demand redress and to remake citizenship.

Common to many of these examples is the way that relationships between state, civil society, and market are fused in structuring citizenship. Rather than the autonomous subject of citizen who participates in a clearly defined, analytically distinct public sphere governed by a sovereign entity that is assumed in liberal theories of citizenship, these examples highlight the complex interrelationships that structure a field in which a subject – a citizen – might operate. Mamdani (1996) argues this is context in which citizenship in post-colonial states develops. But thinking about marginalised people in societies of the global north, it increasingly seems like the context in which people, irrespective of location, operate and in which citizenships of all forms develop. This suggests the importance of looking to a variety of locations – public, private, place-based, socially-constructed, north, and south – to see how citizenship is made and remade. It also suggests the importance of more explicit efforts to examine the topographies that create similarities and differences in the ways citizenship is experienced, understood, and enacted.

## III Where is the Citizen?

Just as Waldo seems to get lost on each page of his books, citizens – individuals – seem to have been lost in the approach to citizenship I have tried develop, in which the relationships, practices and acts that construct, regulate, and contest citizenship are at least as important as the status assigned to individuals. In this way, citizenship is always in formation, is never static, settled or complete, and identities or subjectivities as citizen are similarly unstable. Status as a citizen is, of course, important; it provides moral, political, and economic resources that underlie the ability to act and to shape the conditions in which citizenships are formed. Collectively, the examples discussed previously demonstrate the importance of status, but also how agents and institutions work in relation to a broader set of structures. Much of the discussion, however, has focused on what Isin and Nielsen (2008, p. 2) term "acts of citizenship." They argue that it is important to see citizenship as more than a status held by individuals that empowers them to claim rights. They argue further that it is not sufficient to focus on the practices of citizenship, many of which construct what is often thought of as citizenship's substance. They propose instead a focus on "those acts when, regardless of status and substance, subjects constitute themselves as citizens or, better still, as those to whom the right to have rights is due. But the focus shifts from subjects as such to acts (or deeds) that produce such subjects." Decentring the subject, they argue, allows a focus on disruptions in the historical patterns and relationships that constitute citizenship. This is not a denial of agency, but rather a concern for how citizenship is formed and disrupted. I share Isin and Nielsen's goal of understanding the formation of citizenship, its genealogy, and its disruptions. It nevertheless feels uncomfortable to seem to ignore the citizen-subject, to decentre experience and subjectivity. The practices of citizenship – the daily repetitions that are part and parcel of the relationships that construct and disrupt citizenship – are important to the lives of people and to the potential of citizens to act. It feels unsatisfying to seem to overlook *citizens* in favour of *citizenship*.

This dissatisfaction stems from the very nature of the citizen-subject. In the Waldo books, Waldo never stands alone. Instead, his body, his person, is intertwined with other elements of the scene. There is a way that citizens are like that, as well. Elshtain (1995, p. 9) comments that civil society and the spaces in which citizens are

formed are neither individualist nor collectivist. Yet Elshtain does not offer an alternative to describe what citizens are, if neither individual nor collective. In the absence of such an alternative, it is useful to think about how people negotiate the many citizenships that frame their lives and that they, through their practices and acts, help to construct. There are no stable, fixed answers to the questions of where citizenship and citizen-subjects are located. They are, like Waldo, seemingly everywhere. They are seen in the traces of acts, practices, and relationships that construct, and sometimes disrupt, them.

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